

Testimony Supporting S.B. 278: "An Act Concerning Truancy" and
Supporting S.B. 275: "An Act Concerning Staff Qualifications for School Readiness
Programs for 2015"

Cari Carson, Tamara Kramer, Alexandra Dufresne, J.D., and Cyd Oppenheimer, J.D.
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Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

We testify today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children *supports* S.B. 278 – "An Act Concerning Truancy" and S.B. 275 – "An Act Concerning Staff Qualifications for School Readiness Programs for 2015."

I. Connecticut Voices for Children supports S.B. 278, which will help Connecticut better serve truant students.

Truancy¹ is a significant risk factor for dropout, delinquent behavior, and school failure.² Research shows that attendance rates in ninth grade are the best predictor of whether a high school freshman will graduate on-time from high school.³ In Connecticut, police officers have noted the significant link between reducing truancy and preventing juvenile delinquency.⁴ Truancy is also a risk factor for adult criminal justice involvement and incarceration.⁵ Research in Connecticut and nationally indicates that unmet educational and mental health needs are significant causes of truancy.⁶

¹ Section 10-198a of the Connecticut General Statutes defines a truant student as "a child age five to eighteen, inclusive, who is enrolled in a public or private school and has four unexcused absences from school in any one month or ten unexcused absences from school in any school year." Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-198a (a). Available online at: <http://cga.ct.gov/2009/pub/chap168.htm#Sec10-198a.htm>; A habitually truant student is defined in statute as "a child age five to eighteen, inclusive, who is enrolled in a public or private school and has twenty unexcused absences within a school year." Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-200. Available online at: <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2009/pub/chap168.htm#Sec10-200.htm>.

² Myriam L. Baker, Jane Nady Sigmon, and M. Elaine Nugent. "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School." Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. September 2001. p. 1. Available online at: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/188947.pdf>.

³ Manpower Demonstration Research Center, "Fast Fact: Ninth-Grade Attendance Rates Predict High School Graduation." August 2007. Available online at: http://www.mdrc.org/area_fact_35.html.

⁴ See, e.g., S Goode, "Officers Find Few Truants in City Sweep." *Hartford Courant*, May 4, 2007; M Garriga, "Police, Panel Staffers Will Visit Truant Students." *New Haven Register*, February 15, 2007.

⁵ See note 2, p. 2.

⁶ Andrea Spencer and Emily Breon. "Truancy: A Closer Look – The Link Between Unmet Educational Needs and Truancy." Center for Children's Advocacy. p. 4; See note 2, p. 2.

Easily comparable, publicly available information on truancy in Connecticut districts does not currently exist. In 2009, the Connecticut legislature – recognizing the importance of knowing the scope of the truancy problem in order for it to be addressed – passed Public Act 09-143⁷, which will make truancy data available on all upcoming Strategic School Profiles.⁸ Even prior to the publication of that data, we can infer from school attendance data that truancy is a significant problem in Connecticut.⁹ A recent study by the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance found that nearly one-fifth of students in selected districts were absent for more than 10% of the school year.¹⁰ Those students who were absent for more than 10% of the school year missed almost a month of school each year, on average.¹¹ Even the “typical attendance” student in consortium districts missed more than two weeks of school, with the average high school student absent for 17 school days per school year.¹²

P.A. 09-143 was a crucial step towards combating truancy by making truancy data publicly available. S.B. 278 builds upon this progress by requiring steps to be taken to increase the comparability across districts of the reported data. S.B. 278 states that the State Board of Education shall define “excused absence” and “unexcused absence” for use by school districts and to define the criteria by which districts measure, collect, and report attendance data. Research shows that many Connecticut districts already have largely consistent definitions of excused and unexcused absences.¹³ Nonetheless, this bill’s requirement is a commonsense and cost-neutral step to ensure state-wide consistency in truancy and attendance definitions and reporting. To achieve greater clarity in the bill’s language, Connecticut Voices for Children recommends that the language in S.B. 278, Sec. 2(a) be revised to read:

“On or before July 1, 2011, the State Board of Education shall [(1)] define (1) “excused absence” and “unexcused absence” for use by local and regional boards of education for purposes of carrying out the provisions of section 10-198a of the general statutes, as amended by this act, and (2) the criteria by which local and regional boards of education are to measure, collect and report on data concerning truancy and attendance in the school district .

⁷ The text of P.A. 09-143 – “An Act Concerning the Reporting of Truancy Data and the Reduction of Certain Duplicate Reports by the Department of Information Technology” – can be found online at: <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2009/ACT/PA/2009PA-00143-R00SB-00940-PA.htm>.

⁸ Lauren Velazquez and Alexandra Dufresne. “The Canary in the Coal Mine: Publishing Truancy Data Will Help Keep Children in School.” Connecticut Voices for Children. July 2009. p. 1. Available online at: <http://www.ctkidslink.org/publications/edu09truancydata.pdf>.

⁹ While attendance data are not an exact measure of truancy, as truancy relates only to unexcused absences, attendance data provide a related measure. Chronic absenteeism and truancy, therefore, are closely related but not identical.

¹⁰ Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance. “Attending to Attendance – Student Attendance Data: Key Findings 2006-2007 School Year.” July 2008. p. 6. Available online at: http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/cjppd/cijjyd/jjydpublishations/reportstudentattendancedata7_2008.pdf. In 2006-2007, 25 school districts provided attendance data as part of the consortium.

¹¹ Id. at 6.

¹² Id. at 5.

¹³ See note 8, p. 1.

pursuant to the provisions of subsection (c) of section 10-220 of the general statutes.”

S.B. 278 also states a timeframe in which the superintendent of schools must file a Family with Service Needs petition after attempts to engage a student and his or her family in solving the truancy problem have been unsuccessful.¹⁴ This timeframe is needed to ensure that students and families are referred to the services they need in a timely manner. A lack of a timeframe risks a delay in referral and the possibility of a student slipping by without services and with continued chronic absenteeism. Connecticut Voices for Children recommends that the language in S.B. 278, Sec. 1 (c) be clarified to read:

“...not later than [fifteen days] ten school days after failure to attend such meeting...”

This language provides a clear parameter that will help school personnel to address needs of truant students earlier, before truancy becomes chronic.

These provisions will help Connecticut to consistently identify its truant population and to serve these students in a timely manner, thereby reducing truancy. By reducing truancy rates, Connecticut can promote positive outcomes for its students, including increased school achievement, higher graduation rates, and lower delinquency rates.

II. Connecticut Voices for Children strongly supports the implementation of S.B. 275, which would amend the pre-school teacher standards established by PA 05-245 for school readiness programs.

In 2005, legislation was passed that created a new requirement for teachers in preschool classrooms that were recipients of school readiness funding. Currently, a school readiness classroom is only required to have one adult who has a child development associate degree and 12 college credits, which are four three-credit courses. The requirements set out in PA 05-245 require that each classroom have an adult with a minimum of either a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, childhood development, or a related field, or a certification with an endorsement in early childhood education or special education by July 1, 2015. With only 36% of the teachers in state-funded programs¹⁵ currently holding bachelor's degrees and 24% of the teachers in these programs holding associate degrees, Public Act 05-245 sets a goal that would be unachievable within five years.

Senate Bill 275 would maintain the intent of PA 05-245, which was to raise the standards and qualifications for teachers working with the state's youngest children, while creating a goal that is attainable. This new proposal requires that by 2015, at least 50% of early childhood teachers in state-funded programs hold a bachelor's degree from an approved, competency-based program and the remaining teachers must hold an associate degree from an approved, competency-based

¹⁴ Section 10-198a (b) of the Connecticut General Statutes states that a meeting shall be held with the parent or guardian of a child within ten school days of that child meeting the definition of a truant student. Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-198a (b). Available online at: <http://cga.ct.gov/2009/pub/chap168.htm#Sec10-198a.htm>

¹⁵ Publicly funded refers to all SDE School Readiness, DSS state funded centers, and state-funded Head Start.

program.¹⁶ Individuals graduating from these programs would also earn an Early Childhood Teacher Credential.

This proposal remains consistent with research demonstrating that effective early childhood teachers have specific knowledge and competencies to teach young children¹⁷; falls in line with national NAEYC and Head Start standards; and establishes a high standard of competence for CT early childhood teachers.

We believe, given the current makeup of the early childhood field, that modifying teacher requirements as we have outlined above would create a target that could actually be reached. Accordingly, we strongly support Senate Bill 245.

¹⁶ The Departments of Education and Higher Education will be responsible for approving bachelor's and associate's degree program that meet the early childhood competencies established by a Standards Committee convened in 2009.

¹⁷ Robert Pianta and Carolee Howes, "The Promise of Pre-K," 2009.